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Teacher`s Role as a Counsellor

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Abstract

In this paper we aimed to investigate the counsellors' perceptions, attitudes and expectations towards the counselling activity from school. The qualitative analysis of the answers followed to identify the aspects that represent the content of counselling activity and school orientation, with the aim to differentiate those aspects that can be used by class master and applied in their didactic activity. Another aspect that was followed consisted in identifying problems or groups of problems that are most common in counselling activity. The quality of our collaboration with class master and the relation with the family were the last aspects investigated.

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Keywords: school counselling, counsellor, class master, problematic situations.

1. Paper Rationale

Each teacher in the school has the obligation to contribute to a perfect realization of the harmony among cognitive, affective, behaviourist, attitudinal and social sides of students.

In making this article we started from a few sore points felt at the level of Romanian counselling scholar system, among which we enumerate:

- The great number of those who benefit from the process (400 kindergarten children or 800 school children according to the Organizational and Functional Requirement of County Centres for Educational Resources and Assistance) of whom a single counsellor has to deal with;

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- The activity of the psycho-pedagogical centres is insufficient in the sense that they do not cover the entire territory, and on the other side, it does not explicitly include counselling actions and psychological assistance for students. Most of the activities that take place in this centres aim at professional and orientation counselling of students.
- The confusion between specific activities of educational counselling and the specific of psychotherapy or clinical psychology. This confusion is sometimes the result of an incorrect popularization of the respective private practice and of the activities that take place there.

The counselling activity takes place within the school at different levels, so we can identify:

- a) *A first level is that of permanent advice and support.* By the nature of the teaching profession, very teacher offers his students support, aid, counselling and establishes a relation of direct and continuous communication. The object of this type of counselling is represented by the problems strictly connected to the discipline that the teachers teaches and rarely does he deal with more personal aspects from the student's life. At this level, one admits the fact that the teacher's special and psycho-pedagogical training is not sufficient.
- b) *A second level is represented by the scholar counselling.* Each teacher who completed his training through courses and continuous practice or through high studies- can offer scholar counselling activities. The object of this type of counselling is represented by the personal problems/difficulties that students meet in their school life as well as those outside school. The increase of formation in the educational process, theoretical proposed in the last century and brought more acutely in the centre of preoccupations in Romania by the recent learning reform was realized by the introduction of a new curriculum, called *Counselling and Orientation*, present at all the three school levels: primary, secondary and high school and, rarely, in the university environment. (Cocoradă, 2004, p.7). The new discipline comes to meet the fundamental needs of every child or teenager: self knowledge and self respect, positive communication and interrelationship, learning some techniques for efficient and creative learning, taking decisions and solving problems, a healthy way of life, acquiring marks in scholar and professional orientation, stress management, time planning. (Băban, 2009, p. 16).

In educational practice we can find the situation in which, under the name of *Counselling and Orientation* one holds traditional main teaching classes which take up most of the objectives from the counselling field. The relation between the psycho-pedagogical counselling class and the main teaching one still remain confuse at the level of the official documents and educational practice. The new character of this curriculum is stipulated in the *National Curriculum for the Obligatory Learning. The Reference Frame* (1998) and the methodological frame *Counselling and Orientation* (2001) adds the new one. Counselling and orientation does not represent "a new learning subject in his classical acceptance, but a mechanism to change information between partners..."

According to the documents mentioned above, these activities are held by school psychologists, in collaboration with "teams of teachers" named by the administration council in each school, that have to follow the realization of some "applications, practice developments, experiences and attitudes that have to be learned in order to be exercised in life." (Jigău, 2001, p. 7).

In the actual pedagogical practice, these classes are presented in the curriculum only in some schools, held mostly by school psychologists. In other schools, the traditional main teaching classes take up most of the objectives from the counseling field, without being held with specific methodology, which influences negatively its efficiency. Where they are still present, counseling classes have the same insufficient stipulated status, in some schools being subjects at which students receive grades, in other schools subjects receive grades according to the model of main teaching classes. (Cocoradă, 2004, p. 12).

Main teaching class takes up the contents of the Counseling and Orientation curriculum, which implies educational counseling, held by teachers who are trained for the counseling and orientation activities, by participating to the course of „Counseling and Orientation.”

Teacher Gheorghe Tomşa (1999) draws attentions on the fact that the counseling actions should not be mistaken by a lesson or other forms of didactic activities, they are not, and they cannot be considered study subjects. Counseling is not taught, but is made under the form of some practice meetings, during which one develops a certain type of relation, the counseling relation.

- c) *The third level of scholar counselling* deals with ensuring pedagogical assistance, as well as psychological assistance, which means a psycho-pedagogical specialized complex assistance offered to students at the Inter-schools Private Practices and County Centres and by professionals: psychologists, pedagogues, psycho-pedagogues, psycho-sociologists.

2. Paper theoretical foundation and related literature

In the document from the year 2003 named *Reforming Lifelong Guidance and Counselling. Contribution of the commission's expert group, Progress report*, the work group of the European Commission emphasized the contribution of counselling and orientation in reaching the objectives from the program *Education and Training 2010: „information, counselling and orientation should be included as a transverse principle of training and educational politics”*, from the perspective of the general aims that these services serve: economic development, social cohesion, efficient integration on the job market, permanent learning.

Besides this general aspect, one mentioned the necessity of considering the *guiding role of the teacher/trainer*. More exactly, according to realizing the Objective 1.1: Training teachers and trainers from the program *Education and Training 2010*, recommendation number 8 for the work group emphasized the importance of the counseling teacher and the trainer and it stipulated to include a new approach in training teachers, that should contain a specific dimension referring to the teacher's role of counselor, from the perspective of permanent learning.

School is, sometimes, the only place outside home, where students have the possibility to obtain social and orientation support, which makes the teacher an essential resource for them. (Kline and Silver, 2004).

Considered as the main resource for students, the teacher has the main responsibility in counseling and orientation being given the fact that he spends a long time in the presence of students, observes them in many contexts, he can supervise them better, he can evaluate them but in the same time because the teacher has the necessary psycho-pedagogical training, even if not at the level of a specialist in the field.

In reality, a simple counting shows that each of those 800-1000 students that are in the care of a school psychologist, would not benefit during the four years cycle of more than a discussion of an hour or two with the psychologist (who will make thus a very sketchy evaluation). Thus, the counseling teacher or the psychologist can represent an important support especially for the cases and situations that need specialized and personalized interventions.

In his double quality of teacher and counselor, the teacher holds *activities of assistance, support and prevention* of different problems that a student has to pass through, by ensuring a frame and a climate favorable to his development.

Thus, the teacher enters in direct and immediate contact with the student's *needs* and according to the severity of these he decides who the competent person is in order to solve, ameliorate or correct the situation. If the student's situation needs consulting a specialist, the teacher guides the student to the school psychologist, preparing him in the same time for the communication with him. The responsibility of the family is sometimes out of place towards school, which has to solve all the difficult educational arguments that appear during school years.

3. Methodology

The present study was based exclusively on the analyze of quantitative type with the aim of obtaining a more real and detailed image of the present theme.

With this aim we realized profound interviews on the base of a structured guide with school counselors who are active in this field. The interview guide was structured on sections so that it should cover a wide range of themes referring to: school counseling and orientation activity, the categories of problems met more frequently in the counseling activity, types of conflicts/problematic situations managed by class masters, the quality of collaboration with class masters, and the relation with the family environment.

4. Results

4.1. Aspects of school counseling activity

According to the interviewed counselors own definitions and depictions, school counseling activity means mainly the emotional assistance of students in difficult life situations, at a familial, social and school level, psycho-pedagogical assistance in special school situations as school in adaptation, skipping classes and school withdrawal, repetition of a school year. Another preoccupation of school counselor refers to support and information given in cases of illegal substances abuse, as well as creating some programs for reducing and preventing physical and verbal violence in the school environment and of other deviant behavior as skipping classes, stealing or self-aggression.

School counselor from secondary school take care of, except those enumerated above, of the screening of students who are in the 5th to 8th grades, of their initial individual and group psycho-motric evaluation. In special situations, the counselor can and even recommends a specialty consult and encourages the parents to make these steps, realizing thus support counseling.

The relation with the family is an important element of the counseling activity, the family's implication in school life being realized under the form of participation to parents meetings, lectures, main teaching classes or in any other activity from or outside the curriculum. In intervention situations the counselor has the role to guide the parents with the aim to model their children's behaviors.

Another component of the counselor's role is that of vocational guidance addressed to students in final years of study (8th and 12th grades).

Other activities realized by counselor refer to: participating to different specialty committees in order to assess, guide and counsel in school; participating to committees initiated at the school level for different school or extra-scholar activities outside his specialization (ex. The Project Committee, the Committee to Prevent Aggressively); coordinating and holding many projects with an outside school role).

Summing all up, the counselor has a double role in the scholar environment: that of prevention and intervention in order to solve the above mentioned situations (inadaptability, absenteeism, conflict).

4.2 The frequency and gravity of problems met in counseling activity

According to notes, the most frequent problems met in school environment are from family, school, affective/sentimental, disciplinary and self-knowledge areas:

- *School problems*: school inadaptability, absenteeism, low school promotion and school abandon, difficulty of understanding children with learning difficulties who came from disadvantaged families or from Children Placement Centers, behavioral deficiencies as ADHD.
- *Familial problems*: students who came from familial backgrounds with very low socio-economic situations, students from single parent families, divorced parents, students who pass through difficult situations due to a parent's death, students with emotional problems and its cause being family abandon of one or both parents who left abroad to work, etc.
- *Problems of sentimental nature*: lack of affective response from those sentimentally invested by teenagers, disappointments, sentimental frustrations, different emotional expectations, physical and emotional abuses from partners.
- *Identity and self-knowledge problems*: self-searching, self-analyze, the need to understand his own identity, behaviors and personal expectations from others and themselves, analyze on personality development during teenage years, etc.
- *Disciplinary problems*: deriving from rules and regulations, bully acts, aggression towards opposite, self-aggression (suicide attempts), juvenile delinquency, violence.
- *Misjudged ideas, preconceptions*: Even though this is not a problem in itself, this type of thinking is met at some parents, as well as some teachers, these considering that only those children who have "real" problems end up at a psychologist, followed by the fact that every child who needs the counselor's intervention to receive a negative label just because he goes to the counseling private practice. The implications of these prejudices represent one of the reasons why the quality of the teacher-student relation is demanding.

The cases we dealt with include situations of certain gravity, most of these referring to abuses and violence, in school environment as well as at home. These manifestations are to be seen mostly at preadolescence and teenage

students, and consequences lead to aggression and frequent marginalization. Violence is to be seen in students' behavior mostly verbally (most frequent reported), and the cases of physical violence are less frequent.

4.3. Situations that can be met by class masters

Counselors agree that class masters may take action at a classroom level in order to prevent certain situations, with this aim identifying and understanding the causes being primordial. There are notes according class master' intervention in classrooms, which reduce the number of cases that finally reach the specialty counselors' attention. Other notes emphasize the fact that class master call a counselor's intervention only in severe situations, which are part of the above mentioned cases.

“Class masters can do support counseling, becoming emphatic towards the emotional and familial problems that some students tell them, trying to understand the reasons which found their base of some students' emotional disorders and their deviant behaviors.”

Communicating with students represents, according to counselors, the key factor of the relation between class masters and their students, and approaching the aspects which refer to group cohesion, self-knowledge, reducing violence, class communication represent a starting point in preventing a significant number of problems.

4.4 Collaboration between school counselors and class masters

The relation between teachers and school counselors manifest, according to the school environment, at a more superficial level (class masters appeal to counselors only in situations that overcome their abilities) or more profound (class masters and counselors work closely with the aim to prevent and solve difficult situations even from early signs).

“These ask for my free support in most situations, but, only if they are convinced of the complexity of the problem which appeared and of the fact that it is beyond their competences and ability, their didactic cadence needed to solve this.”

“Some class masters consider that they might lose their authority in front of the students, if they would give up objectivity and would not sanction behaviors that are against regulations, group rules in which they are installed and depute the task to understand motivation behind these behaviors to me, the school counselor, also in my task coming the search for an individualized personal program to remedy the situation experienced by that student, or group.”

“It would be ideal a permanent, proactive collaboration to exist, from the counselor's part as well as from the head teacher's in order to solve situations, cases that appear, but, in practice, it does not always happen like this, some class masters assume more of the counselor's competences, some gives the latter responsibilities that would have been of him”.

“Collaboration with class masters and with teachers from the classes in which there are children with certain difficulties is essential. As well as collaboration with parents is. Some class masters still have the feeling of self-sufficiency, considering themselves able and they end up at the counselor's private practice in worst moments together with the child or the parent.”

4.5. The relation with the family

The necessity of family implication in counseling is fundamental. Some counselors consider that this one is more important than the relation with the class masters, emphasizing the role of the family as an educational, support, and inadequate behavior correction factor from school and family space.

“Collaboration with family is as important as, sometimes even more important, than the relation with the class master, in order to solve some problems signaled by students, and in the case of minors obtaining the parents' written acceptance is obligatory in order to work with the student individually, at the private practice, according to the identified needs, and in some situations one should work, council in common and separate meetings even the parent, the parents, who thus become co-therapists, team mates in solving their child's problems.”

“Sometimes, due to lack of time, information, or out of fear, the sense of guilt that they feel, parents refuses collaboration with school, the head teacher and school counselor, in these cases, the steps of the psycho-educational counseling becoming a lot harder, difficult to realize, due to the lack of one of the most important links, family support.”

5. Conclusions

Concerning the daily routine school activity, the participants appreciate that the problems and difficulties identified and confronted in school environment can be solved by developing the educational counseling competences among teachers. The responses connected to difficult situations that were met and the solutions that were implemented reflect the fact that the most frequent incidents in school environment are those which come from verbal violence. Incidents that contain physical violence or the destruction of school objects are less frequent as reported. On the other hand, skipping classes and low motivation to learn represent aspects that teachers confront very frequently.

In the context of the above mentioned problems, school counselors consider that teachers can take action at the class level in order to prevent certain situations, thus reducing the number of cases that later reach their attention. A strong starting point in preventing a high number of problems is represented by classroom communication, especially communication with students. Other key factors implied are: relationship with family as well as collaboration with all educative actors.

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Interview guide

Please present to me, shortly, what does your active as a school counsellor suppose?

What are the problem categories or the problems that you meet most frequently in your activity?

Which are the predominant cases? Among these, which are the most severe?

What is the age that supposes problems? Is there a specific typology of a class of problems?

Do you consider that there are situations that can be headed off by class master, without the necessity of the school counsellor's intervention? If yes: Please give me a few examples

Do you work with class masters to solve problematic situations met in school? What kind of collaboration do you use?

The role of counsellor is supposed to speak with the family of the students that come to you with different problems?